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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the efforts of the Chinese Communist government since 1949 to bring literacy to the masses through its language reform policies. The policies discussed include the establishment of a common dialect, simplification of Chinese characters, and the development of a Chinese phonetic alphabet. In addition, the paper discusses methods and materials used in the teaching of reading in China. (FL)

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LITERACY AND LANGUAGE REFORM IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

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INTRODUCTION

Since the normalization of relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China, there has been an intense interest in China, her people, customs and practices. But there are other significant factors to examine when looking at the most populous nation on earth with 970 million people. Today, as throughout much of Chinese history, over 80% of China's people are peasants living in the countryside. But in 1949 only 15% of China's population was literate.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the policies of the Communist government since 1949 regarding its effort to bring literacy to the masses through its language reform policies. These policies included such efforts as the establishment of a common dialect, simplification of Chinese characters, and the development of a Chinese Phonetic Alphabet. In addition methods and materials for teaching reading in China will also be described.

LANGUAGE REFORM POLICIES

In 1951 after the Communists had assumed control of the government, Mao Zedong established national policy regarding the direction on language reform. Mao stated "the written language must be reformed; it should follow the common direction of phoneticization which has been taken by the world's languages." (Mills, p. 517)

In 1957 at a meeting of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Zhou Enlai delivered a speech delineating the process and steps in language reform. Zhou specified the tasks involved which called for the popularization of a standard dialect which is Mandarin dialect with Peking

pronunciation, the simplification of Chinese characters, and the devising and implementation of a Chinese Phonetic Alphabet.

REFORMING THE ORAL LANGUAGE - COMMON SPEECH

Although the major ethnic group in China, the Han, comprise over 90% of the people, there are 54 different nationalities in China. The language spoken by most people in China is called Chinese and has eight major dialects. The difference between some of these dialects is as great as the difference between Italian and Spanish, or French and Italian. Though some dialects are not mutually intelligible, the differences lie primarily in pronunciation since the written form and the grammar are basically the same. (China Reconstructs, June, 1978)

Since the major dialects are all referred to as Chinese, one can see that the Chinese as well as other national groups, use political and geographic criteria to define a "language." An important linguistic aspect of their "languageness" is that regardless of dialect, any literate Chinese can read the same characters regardless of how they pronounce the words. In this sense characters have an historic and unifying impact on the people. Yet the establishment of a standard dialect was essential for facilitating communication between peoples in various parts of China and also as a way of building a sense of national unity in a country which had been long fragmented. Activity related to the language reform policy statements expressed by Mao began shortly after the Communists took over.

By 1955 the Ministry of Education directed educational institutions throughout the country to establish in-service courses on

the standard dialect for all primary school language teachers. In 1957 elementary, middle schools and teacher training colleges as well as the army were instructed by the Ministry of Education to begin to use the common speech or standard dialect and to offer training programs to teach it. By the end of 1957 over 721,000 teachers in primary, secondary, and teacher training schools were trained in the pronunciation of common speech so that language classes could begin to be taught in the standard dialect. (Zhou Enlai)

By 1958, Mao had requested cadres and political workers to learn the standard dialect as well as the local dialect in the areas where they worked. In this way communication at all levels was assured for maximum contact as well as success. (Wu Youzhang) One of the directives involved in standardizing the common speech was the official recognition of the most common term for an item as opposed to the most literary or unusual. The intent of this decision was to bring the language closer to that of the workers' as opposed to reflecting the literary tradition or the language of the upper class.

There is no question that establishing and teaching a common dialect in China was viewed by the Chinese themselves as a tremendous social movement and so explanations and discussion took place along the way. By 1960, the State Council directing and coordinating the activities involved in language reform had set as a goal that all students above third grade be able to speak in the common speech. Different expectations were made for different, higher levels. For example, middle school students and pre-service

teachers were expected to speak in the common speech but initially with less proficiency. Elementary school teachers and teachers in teacher training colleges were expected to teach in the common speech, with teachers in middle schools understood to have less proficiency. College language teachers were directed to increase the content of their courses in common speech. (Mills)

On the subject of dialects, Zhou Enlai explicitly stated that "dialects will exist for a long time and distinctions should be made between old and young people (with regard to speech); between the activities on a national scale and those of a local nature; between the present and the future." Particularly strict demands with regard to using common speech were also made for film and stage actors and actresses, and radio announcers. (Zhou Enlai, p. 16)

COMMON SPEECH TODAY

Today, all films and national TV and radio broadcasts are made in common speech. Local programs are broadcast in the dialect of the local area. For example, Shanghai opera would be broadcast in the Wu dialect; with Peking opera, Soozhou storytelling, and Shantung talk-show programs in their local dialects. (Ong Heh-nien) Pronunciation differences still exist and only a few speakers in areas outside Peking have mastered the standard pronunciation. These people are likely to be academics or guides for foreigners. Since many of China's leaders are not natives of the Peking area and speak with some regional pronunciation differences, there does not appear to be a stigma attached to less than perfect pronunciation. (Lehmann)

Because of the regional dialect differences, giving instruction in reading, speaking and writing in language class in the common speech has been compared to having English students learn Dutch for reading and writing. (DeFrancis) What ends up happening is that in some areas, particularly in the south where the dialect difference is greatest, the only time students speak in common speech is in Chinese language class. This is compounded by the fact that some teachers lack verbal fluency with common speech although they are teaching it. Yet fluency in common speech among younger persons from non-Mandarin speaking areas is better than that of older persons who attended school before the implementation of the policy requiring instruction in common speech. (Unger[1])

REFORMING THE WRITTEN CHARACTERS

Chinese characters developed around 1300 B.C., and were originally logographic or pictographic. Most Chinese characters today have both a meaning, or ideographic component, and a phonetic component which gives an approximation of the character's sound. The Chinese call their characters ideograms. (China Reconstructs, June, 1978)

The Chinese literary tradition contains the world's oldest literature, and can take pride in having libraries with books by 145 B.C. (Gough) Tshai Lun invented paper in 114 A.D., and an early printing press was invented in China six centuries before Gutenberg's. (Needham; Snow) However, only from 1% to 2% of the population was literate throughout most of Chinese history. (DeFrancis)

Since the early part of the century various proposals had been made to reform Chinese characters to make learning to read easier, so that literacy could be attained by all the people. The basic nature of characters was recognized as part of the problem. The President of the Chinese Academy of Science asserted that learning to read in Chinese characters took about two more years to achieve the same level of literacy than learning in a phonetic script. (Mills)

In Mao's pronouncements about script reform, he stated that movement needed to occur towards a phonetic script, preceded by the simplification of Chinese characters. (Beijing Review, June, 1973) The tendency towards simplifying characters had been common in the historical evolution of characters. There were already many shortened forms in existence among the people for everyday uses. These were characters written with fewer brush strokes to represent more detailed forms, essentially abbreviations.

In the mid 1950's several lists of simplified characters appeared, and by 1958 Wu Youzhang reported that 544 characters had been simplified, with the average number of strokes reduced from 16 to 8. Characters were simplified in a number of ways. One way of simplifying characters was to reduce the number of brush strokes. Another way involved the standardization of the simplest form when several were available. Sometimes a part of a character or a popular abbreviation was allowed to represent the whole. In some cases new abbreviations were coined, or the phonetic component of a homophone was borrowed. While it was hoped that by 1959 about 3000 simplified characters would be in use, by 1954 only 2000

characters had been simplified. This represented about one-third of the characters in normal modern Chinese usage. (Mills; Lehmann)

ESTABLISHING THE CHINESE PHONETIC ALPHABET - PINYIN

Shortly after the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, a number of committees began work on developing a phonetic alphabet. Their work was set back somewhat when in 1952 Mao said that the new phonetic alphabet should be national in character, in other words they should be based on existing Chinese characters. There were attempts to construct such an alphabet, but this was abandoned and an alphabet based on the Latin form was adopted. (Milsky) Wu Youzhang reported that over 1200 different schemes for a phonetic alphabet were received by the Committee for Reforming the Chinese Written Language. He stated that over 10,000 people from all levels of government as well as suggestions from 4,300 people in various occupations contributed to this effort.

In 1958 the National People's Congress approved the adoption of the current Chinese Phonetic Alphabet (CPA). This is frequently called "pinyin" which literally means "spell sound" system. (Wang) The alphabet is basically used to learn the common speech and to introduce the common speech pronunciation of Chinese characters. The CPA has been the basis for writing in braille; finger spelling for deaf mutes; and for transliterating foreign names, places, and scientific and technical terms. Pinyin has been used for certain product names, flag signals, and telecommunications particularly for sending telegrams in the northeast which is Mandarin speaking. The CPA was also intended to serve as an aid in helping foreigners learn Chinese.

Another use of the CPA was to serve as a basis for compiling indexes based on an alphabetic principle. Pinyin has also been used as a basis for establishing a written language for those minority groups in China who had no written language. As such, pinyin has become an important tool for linguists in China. (Zhou Enlai; Wu Youzhang)

It was hoped that beginning in the fall of 1958 pinyin be used to introduce characters to primary school children. This use was to occur after suitable in-service training of primary school teachers, followed by the training of secondary and preservice teachers. (Wu and Li)

CHARACTER VS. ALPHABET

Although in the early days of the PRC there seemed to be thrust towards replacing characters with a phonetic alphabet, by 1958 there was a definite change in emphasis. In Zhou Enlai's speech to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in 1958, he reassured the people that adopting a Latin alphabet, or pinyin, would not harm patriotism any more than using Arabic numbers, Christian era years, or the use of kilometers and kilograms. Zhou made it clear that the CPA was to be used to "annotate the characters phonetically and to popularize the common speech. It is not to replace characters." (p. 17) As to the future of Chinese characters, Zhou urged no conclusions be drawn. The important consideration is likely the continued use of characters until all Chinese can speak the common dialect, when a phonetic alphabet would be more likely to be adopted. As it now stands, all persons who can read characters share an ancient and unique common system of written

communication. For international communication, Chinese characters are also in use for at least part of the written orthographies in other far eastern countries particularly Korea and Japan. At least for now, the benefits of abandoning characters for a system completely based on pinyin, do not seem to be a viable question for the immediate future.

However, the basic purpose for reforming the written language remains the same --- bringing literacy to the masses. In this effort many changes and problems still remain. In 1957 on New Year's Day newspapers and most magazines began to use horizontal as opposed to vertical printing of type. At this time the simplified forms of characters as well as Arabic numerals also began to appear (Mills). These simplified characters are now in wide use in textbooks, journals and books as well (Beijing Review, June, 1973).

The pinyin system of indexing books was adopted by the People's University Library in Peking in 1961. Reportedly, this reduced the number of errors in filing between 70 to 80% in addition to speeding up filing and locating cards and entries. (DeFrancis2)

The CPA is currently being used as the basis for indexing words in a new Chinese-English dictionary. Some new maps of China for foreigners use the CPA to spell out place names according to Chinese pronunciation. (Beijing Review, December, 1978)

As for printing, there is no such thing as a Chinese typewriter for characters comparable to that for an alphabet. Each character requires a separate piece of type, a factor which presented some problems as well as costs when simplified characters

were introduced. An added difficulty was presented to those who had learned to read simplified characters when presented with materials using unreformed characters. Native speakers who have learned to read unreformed characters report that learning simplified forms is rather easy. (Milsky)

METHODS OF TEACHING CHINESE IN SCHOOLS

Classes for teaching Chinese tc children in China normally contain about 50 students and meet three times per week. Class size in foreign language institutes and at the universities are about half that size. The pinyin system of writing is the first system of writing taught in first grade. This is done in order to teach the Mandarin pronunciation or common speech when introducing characters. The length of time spent teaching pinyin to learn common speech depends on the degree of difference between the local dialect and Mandarin.

By the end of the second grade, students are able to use pinyin to read new words, correct local accents and spell and pronounce syllables. During the third grade, students use pinyin for using the dictionary and reading simple texts, and by fourth grade and above should be able both to read and write in pinyin. (Lehmann) By fifth and sixth grade new characters are not always introduced in pinyin anymore. (DeFrancis[2])

In their analysis of readers in use between 1957 and 1967, Ridley, Godwin and Doolin report that the pinyin alphabet is introduced with characters in first and second grade materials to aid in correct pronunciation along with a picture of the object such as "man." When short sentences are introduced, they are

written with pinyin above the Chinese characters. By the end of the first semester of first grade, short stories are introduced with activities such as copying the story, memorizing and reciting it, or writing it (in pinyin) from dictation. After the end of second grade there is much less emphasis on pinyin.

By the end of primary school (grade five*) students are expected to learn anywhere from 2800 to 3500 characters. If they do not know a particular word, they are encouraged to write the word in pinyin. (Leong; Lehmann) At least up until 1967, however, there were no textbooks which were written entirely in pinyin without charcters. (DeFrancis[2])

In a manual for elementary school language teachers, teachers are instructed to use a variety of methods for explaining and clarifying texts. They are urged to encourage conversations based on the pictures in the text, tell stories based on the text, and analyze the text through the conversational method. Direct explanation of the text is also utilized. Sometimes this becomes necessary since Chinese textbooks often contain information on everyday life and how to deal with it. This information is presented in a variety of forms such as stories, poems, songs, riddles, plays, fables, allegories and everyday sayings. (Ridley, Godwin, and Doolin)

Other methods such as choral reading, flash cards, charts, and visual aids are also used. (Lehmann) Since all the children in the classroom are in the same place in the primer, choral reading

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*During the Cultural Revolution this time was shortened from six years. Recent statements from Hua Guofung indicate the number will increase to six years by 1985.

is a popular practice. This also enables the teachers to stress the particular moral lesson in the story prior to its reading. Memorization of characters as well as whole passages in a story is a common practice. There are whole phrases which reflect a certain style in the Chinese oral and written tradition, and one often hears these phrases in conversation as well as seeing them in writing. The reason for continuing the practice of requiring memorization is precisely to help students develop writing style through modeling. This issue of memorization as a teaching method is so significant in China that even Mao broached the subject stating he objected "stuffing" the students "like Peking ducks." (Unger[2], p. 19-20)

TEXTBOOKS AND CHILDREN'S BOOKS

An analysis of school textbooks can be used to define the attitudes, values, expectations, behavior patterns and social mores which are appropriate in the particular society which uses them. (Martin) Through the socialization process in schools, children are introduced to their culture and trained to become a participating member of that society. (Greenstein) When one keeps in mind that the goal of education in China is to prepare children for the roles of workers, peasants and soldiers in a socialist state, analyses of the content of instructional materials used in China today shows that they are consistent with that goal. (Ridley, Godwin and Doolin)

80% of the Chinese people live and work in the agricultural sector where the lack of machinery is made up for by manual labor. While the Chinese hope to make junior/middle school education

universal in the near future, most people educated in China since the revolution have only a primary school education. Thus the highly regarded role models of the agricultural peasant and manual laborer presented in Chinese readers are realistic within the context of Chinese life. The Chinese often use stories of real people in their readers in order to help children relate to these roles. This practice, as well as the one of promoting moral principles, values and desirable behaviors, is no different from educational practices prior to 1949. This is also a common practice in Taiwanese textbooks. (Martin)

What is different between Chinese books in the PRC and those used on Taiwan are the specific behaviors and roles which are promoted. In the PRC students read stories of good workers and peasants working for the collective good as opposed to personal gain. There are also stories of heroes and martyrs of the revolution, tales of the evil landlords and capitalists, and stories of the hardships of pre-revolutionary China. (Unger[2]) Other behaviors which are seen as valued in the PRC readers are working hard at manual tasks, showing responsibility, initiative, achievement and inventiveness. Main characters are rewarded not with success and fame, but with the internal feeling of satisfaction, fulfillment and the happiness of doing a job well.

There is also a difference between the way in which families are portrayed in reading textbooks in the PRC and on Taiwan. In Taiwanese readers the family is portrayed as the primary social unit. In the PRC family members are often portrayed in their roles in society as a whole, such as in peer groups and work

groups. (Martin) In other words, "Father" is more likely to be seen in his role as a "worker," than in the traditional familial sense.

While official policy is set by the state, the development of textbooks is done at the local levels. This was true even during the Cultural Revolution, and is evidence of much less of a superstructure than one might expect. (Lehmann; Gardner)

In a study examining primers used in first grade during 1975-76, Unger[2] found the books almost the same as those used before the Great Prolitarian Cultural Revolution.

Paperback books for children in China are available at a fairly low cost. For a rather good quality book with color illustrations, one can expect to pay the equivalent of ten to fifteen U.S. cents, readily within the range of the average Chinese family. Books can be found on a variety of topics such as politics, history, science and other subjects as well as about real heroes, workers and soldiers. Frequently, the heroes are children.

An article appearing in China Reconstructs in 1976 stated that there are some topics which are considered inappropriate for children's books. These would include books about superstitious practices and the occult, terrorism, murder, unhealthy fantasies, and books promoting the ideas of "get rich quick" schemes or mythical palaces and treasures. (p. 46) However recently books on more traditional themes have been reappearing. This is in marked contrast to the exclusively socialist realism common during the influence of the "Gang of Four."

If one were to make a comparison between the content of American and Chinese textbooks and children's literature, the similarity between Chinese materials and our own McGuffy readers is quite striking. American books today clearly lack role models representative of the majority of people and values of our society. By contrast, our materials reflect the lack of consensus in values, as well as changing roles and behaviors. In some cases American textbooks lag behind already changing mores and expectations.

CONCLUSION

No actual statistics regarding literacy attainment have been published recently in the PRC. There have been reports that "most" people in China are literate. (Foreign Broadcast Information Service) It is quite likely that with the exception of some elderly persons and for some people in remote mountainous regions, "most" in China today are literate. Universal primary education has been achieved, and soon universal junior/middle school education will be made available to those in the countryside as it is currently in the cities.

Young people in China are learning to speak a common dialect as a second dialect, and an increasing number are studying English - the most popular foreign language in China today.

In the past 31 years the Chinese have been able to reform both their written and oral language to such a degree that one can only marvel at the magnitude and scope. This reform is currently proceeding, recognizing that in the present stage, time is needed for consolidation.

As to whether China will ultimately abandon characters for an alphabet, this eventuality is not certain. In 1950 DeFrancis made a comment which sounds prophetic today:

> Linguistically it is certain that alphabetic writing is possible in China. Politically, it has long been in doubt. The social, political, and military struggle raging in China is now deciding the fate of Chinese nationalism and with it the future of writing. The stage is being set for the most far-reaching cultural revolution in all Chinese history. (p. 254)

As it turns out, post-revolutionary China's greatest cultural revolution may end up being its linguistic one.

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